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Nice man, wrong job

The Senate and its relevant committees must steel themselves for the unwelcome duty of putting sound principle first as they consider Ambassador George Bush's nomination to be chief of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Mr. Bush is a very nice man, without a trace of that arrogance or abrasiveness of manner that would make it easy to deny confirmation. Further, he is a former member of the House of Representatives, a member in good standing of the old boys' club whose promotion to executive appointments is usually treated with special consideration.

But really, Mr. Bush should not become director of the Central Intelligence Agency. We are sure that he means every pledge he has given to the Armed Services Committee about checking his political hat at the door, about not actively participating in party affairs, about accepting the vice presidential nomination only if pressed.

Yet Mr. Bush, if confirmed for the CIA post, would be the first CIA director of unquestionably political provenance in its history. All his predecessors have been, in one way or another, intelligence professionals. That needn't be the rule. But there ought to be a negative rule here — as in the appointment of U. S. attorneys general — against the appointment of people with high party profiles.

All the recent studies of CIA abuses and misjudgments suggest that the single-biggest threat to intelligence professionalism lies in the possibility of political manipulation. That manipulation has usually taken one of two forms. On its

operational side, the intelligence agency becomes the prey of presidential whim — this or that regime, displeasing to the President, must be targeted for subversion or political sabotage. Or, on its intelligence-gathering side, the agency faces an intimidating reluctance in Presidents to receive and use information that goes against the grain of policy.

There was, for instance, no failure of evaluation by the CIA in Southeast Asia. The problem was that its sometimes gloomy assessments of the situation were not welcome to Presidents because they did not sound the expected note of optimism.

President Ford, defending the Bush appointment and others just after the so-called Sunday night massacre, made what is probably the best case against Mr. Bush. The President said he wanted people in the sensitive posts of defense secretary and CIA director with whom he felt at ease — his guys, members of his team.

On any list of 100 desirable traits in an intelligence chief, a disposition for team play would rank near the bottom. Admittedly, the CIA could benefit from a director with a feeling for public sensibilities and public relations. But it is infinitely more vital that he be a hard-bitten naysayer, a man who says the unsayable and when necessary bucks the trend of wishful thinking.

It is no insult to Mr. Bush, a fine public servant, to say that we have great difficulty picturing him in that role in the inner councils of the Ford administration.